

Je Suis Barabbas

When the planes hit the World Trade Center towers, it seemed as if the whole world joined together saying "I am an American" in solidarity with the great suffering we endured.

When fanatics in Paris killed the writers of the French satire magazine, the world stood together, saying with one voice "Je Suis Charlie Ebdo", "I am Charlie Ebdo" – in solidarity with those killed.

And just a couple of weeks ago, similar claims of identifying with the innocent who suffered in the terrorist attack at the Algiers museum could be seen far and wide.

Today, our church takes us to another point of solidarity, of identification, of being one with, as we celebrate first the Feast of the Palms, with its uplifting music, with our raucous march around the neighborhood, all while loudly singing "The King of Glory," only to move to the Passion of our Lord, as we together join in condemning Jesus to death.

The mood shifts so quickly you might feel a case of whiplash coming on, if it wasn't for our natural human ability to move from joy to rage in a matter of seconds.

And today, as we gaze at the now empty cross, his body taken down, placed in the grave all bloodied and beaten, today perhaps we might say, all of us:

"Je suis Barabbas."

"I am Barabbas."

We don't know much about Barabbas, whether he's a freedom fighter for the Jewish people against Roman occupation or whether he's a common criminal, a highwayman, a killer for nothing more than money.

But whatever he is, he's standing in our place.

His name means "son of the father," an ironic contrast to the Son of the Father who is Jesus himself.

Whether he's a freedom fighter or a common crook, Barabbas, like us, prefers force to surrender.

Like us he relies on his own wits and cunning rather than surrendering his life to God.

Like us, he's a man who knows it's a dog eat dog world, and he's neck deep in what the world calls common sense.

Whether he's Robin Hood or Jesse James, power and violence are his tools of trade.

I am Barabbas.

Before God, I stand convicted, guilty of murder, if not at the end of a knife, then at the end of my tongue...a life perhaps not taken but a reputation destroyed.

I am Barabbas.

Before God, I stand convicted, for refusing to trust the repeated covenants God so freely gives, preferring to store up for myself treasures here and now, suspicious as I am of treasure stored for the next life.

I am Barabbas.

A woman left the Palm Sunday service and whispered to the priest bidding everyone goodbye "I just can't say: 'crucify him.'"

She may have thought she was saying something admirable, but in fact she missed the truth of this day.

When GK Chesterton was asked to write a magazine article entitled "What's Wrong With The World," he submitted a two word reply.

It said: "I am."

The passion of our Lord reminds me that we are each of us the problem, that we are each of us Barabbas, content to meet violence with violence in a cycle that never ends, while rejecting the way of Jesus, a way that "soaks up the injustice, evil and oppression like the venom of a sting, unleashing a far more powerful force of love and forgiveness." D. Garland, The New Application Commentary, 583.

Only getting down low, so we can say yes to that truth, allows us to be set free.

We are, after all, natural born fighters – we are, after all, whether with words or knives, natural born killers too.

There is only one remedy for people like you and I.

It is to surrender.

"The only thing that stops a fight is surrender; since it takes two to fight. Surrender eliminates rivalry.

Plenty will scoff at the idea of surrender; whether by an individual, a clan or a nation, but this is precisely what we are called to do.

It's not me saying so, it's St. Paul:

"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross." Phil. 2:5-7.

The great poet W.H. Auden was asked once why he was a Christian, instead of a Buddhist or a Confucian, since each shares similar ethical values.

And Auden said, "Because nothing in the figure of Buddha or Confucius fills me with the overwhelming desire to scream, 'crucify him!'"

Just imagine if we believers took the gospel of Jesus Christ into the Pentagon planning rooms!

Just imagine if we took the gospel into our corporate board rooms!

And, Lord have mercy, just imagine if we took the gospel into the councils of the church!

Not the watered down, me and my personal pal Jesus; but the real gospel; the gospel that insists that the foolishness of God is the narrow gate through which we might find life.

When we honestly confront the upside down nature of God; when we honestly confess that "letting go" and "giving up" define God, who isn't standing side by side with Mr. Auden, screaming with all of our might: "crucify him!?"

And that's why the lady who couldn't say it missed the point.

We are Christians, and as much as it rubs our human nature the wrong way, surrender is the very heartbeat of the gospels:

... "unless a seed dies, it remains but a single grain."

"unless you lay down your life....."

"unless you take up your cross....."

"turn the other cheek...."

"walk the second mile...."

Surrender is the keystone of our theology and of our sacraments.
Surrender is love in action.

When we acknowledge, together, that yes indeed, we are Barabbas, we then become the community that can also stand at the foot of the cross, under the very Word of God's forgiveness.

"This is my blood, shed for many for the forgiveness of sins."

We are the many.

If we can embrace this truth, and be thankful for the forgiveness we receive, then perhaps that thankfulness, that sense of gratitude, can allow us to forgive those who have hurt us, as individuals, as communities, even as a nation.

It is in the circle of surrender meeting forgiveness, that we encounter the mystery that is God, in which all of creation lives and breathes and has its being.

I am Barabbas.

And so are you.

Thanks be to God!

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